

All that Glitters is not Gold – Sustainability Discourse in German Family Policy

Paper prepared for the 8th ESPAnet Conference 2010, Budapest, 2-4 September 2010
Stream: Family Policies and the Reconciling of Paid Work and Care. Changing family
life and challenges to social policy (Mia Hakovirta and Anita Haataja)

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Abstract

Socioeconomic transformations have led to new social risks which provoked a changing role of welfare systems. Family policies have been notably shaped by these developments which affect the policy field on an actor-centred, a structural and on a discursive level. Concerning the latter, sustainability discourse – addressing amongst others new social risks – has emerged in German family policy at the turn of the new millennium. In this perspective, strategic networks were established, economic and demographic argumentation gained importance and evaluation of family policy measures was set up. Indeed, actors frequently refer to sustainability as being an apt way to respond to recent socioeconomic challenges. However, the understanding of sustainability in family policy is very heterogeneous, depending on the actors' points of view.

Empirically, the paper provides an expansion and reflection of definitions given in the context of sustainability in family policy. Furthermore, it analyzes the implementation of participative aspects as integral element of sustainability. The analysis is based on the most important expertises in this field and on 32 interviews conducted with scientists, representatives from welfare and family organizations, relevant foundations and the judicial sphere as well as with policy makers on all federal levels.

In detail, the paper reveals that although the concept of sustainability is referred to as innovative solution to socioeconomic transformations, sustainability discourse can be supposed to be (also) a means to other ends: Amongst others, it can be seen as a sort of ex-post legitimation for political changes that had already been induced on national level earlier. Using the example of the *Lokale Bündnisse für Familie* (bringing together state and societal actors at the local level), the paper shows that – contrary to what is suggested in sustainability discourse – unconventional types of networks may not just like that be considered to be sustainable ones.

1. Introduction¹

Family policies have been notably shaped by socioeconomic transformations that took place in the last few years. These changes affect the policy field on an actor-centred, a structural and on a discursive level. Concerning the latter, sustainability discourse – addressing amongst others new social risks like single parenthood or balancing work and caring – has come to light in German family policy at the turn of the new millennium. Emerged in forestry contexts, the term of sustainability originally stands for a lack of natural resources which had been pointed out especially by the Club of Rome (Meadows et al. 1972) in the 1970s. In its more recent version, the term does not imperatively deal with the lack of natural resources alone but also with economic or social ones, resulting in a socio-economic-ecological triangle.² In the early 1990s, the concept of sustainability has been expanded both geographically and concerning its content on the occasion of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED; 1992 in Rio de Janeiro). Generally, it aims at reconciling normative goals (e.g. long term political concepts) and political reality (e.g. short term logic of democratic systems).

On a scientific level, sustainability-related research mainly concentrates on the question of how sustainability concepts should be arranged. It finds that they should include normative aspects as well as integrate relevant dimensions. Last but not least, participation of all relevant actors is considered to be important. This is true both in the elaboration as well as in the implementation process (Nölting et al. 2004). To resume, sustainability concepts should be *normative*, *integrative* and *participative*. According to sustainability research, the concepts' normative base should consist of criteria such as intra- and intergenerational justice, preservation of quality of life and persistence of the system. Furthermore, researchers underline that one has to consider several dimensions when establishing a sustainability concept (e.g. an ecological, an economic and a social one). However, although there are research activities in this field, the idea of sustainability cannot be understood as a pure scientific one. It is rather located at the intersection of science, politics, economics and the general public and represents a kind of a politico-ethical, normative idea (Schäfer 2008: 21f.). For this reason it is marked by its

¹ This paper is part of an ongoing PhD-project under the direction of Prof. Dr. Irene Gerlach and Prof. Dr. Klaus Schubert at the University of Münster. The topic of sustainability discourse in German family policy has already been dealt with in Ahrens (forthcoming). As some of the basic assumptions did not change in the meantime, this paper partly resorts to the latter.

² However, these three aspects should not be considered to be solitary ones. In fact, the triangle rather stands for interdependencies between ecological, economic and social sphere (Nölting et al. 2004: 255).

practical orientation, concentrating on the formulation of sustainability concepts (Nöltling et al. 2004: 254).

In the 1990s, questions of sustainability began to arise in Germany. Marked ecologically at first, its understanding became multidimensional some time later. In 2002, the red-green government accomplished a national sustainability strategy which set up the political landmarks for the following years (Bundesregierung 2002: 323).³ One year earlier, the red-green cabinet had appointed the German Council for Sustainable Development as well as a special committee for sustainable development at the chancellery. In 2004, a parliamentary advisory board for sustainable development was established by the German Bundestag. In this institution, 40 deputies from all parliamentary groups work together (Bundesregierung 2008: 29).⁴ Generally, the red-green government underlines the cross sectional aspect of sustainability in its national strategy (Bundesregierung 2002: 1). As a consequence, measures in every policy field should meet criteria of sustainability. This is also true for family policy.

Thus, over several decades German family policy has developed in a way very contrary to what theoretical requirements in terms of sustainability might suggest. In fact, it has rather been marked by ideologisation, reflecting the differences between Christian Democrats (CDU/CSU) and Social Democrats (SPD), than by inter-partisan cooperation, aiming at defining and reaching goals in a consensual way. Indeed, until the end of the 1990s, changing partisan constellations provoked changes concerning the policy's main foci.⁵ Furthermore, its participative character was limited; as family interests were for a long time considered to be a private matter, interest groups had a weak position in German family policy (Gerlach 2010: 38f., 429ff.). However, amongst others due to Constitutional Court's rulings pointing out the importance of families' performances for the whole society, ideologisation became less important at the end of the 1990s. In addition, the congruence between parties seems to have increased: At the changeover from the red-green (1998-2005) to the Grand coalition (2005-2009), the new government took over several aspects, e.g. the idea of an income-related parental benefit which had been conceptualized under the red-green coalition. Furthermore, concerning their goals, party

³ This strategy is reviewed continuously.

⁴ For further details concerning the inauguration of new institutions also see Bundesregierung 2008.

⁵ In rare cases, it even led to cancellation of measures that had been introduced by former governments. This was the case of tax exemption for dependent children (*Kinderfreibetrag*) that had been established in 1949 under a CDU/CSU majority and was abolished in 1975 under a SPD majority. In 1983, it was re-established by a CDU-minister. However, parties rather tend to introduce new measures that correspond to their political focus than to abolish measures of former governments. As a consequence, a clutter of measures – partly contradictory ones – has been created over the years.

programs seem to differ from each other in only a few aspects lately (Gerlach 2010: 156ff.). Parallel to this continuity, the demographic situation and its consequences, Constitutional Court's rulings as well as an increasing family poverty rate led to changes in the understanding of family policy (Gerlach 2010: 156). Additionally, there have been changes in working style and in argumentation (Ostner 2007) as well as concerning actor constellations (e.g. Ristau 2005) in the recent past. These changes are often referred to as being part of a 'new' family policy. As a synonym for 'new', the term of 'sustainable' family policy is frequently used in political, public and academic discourse since the beginning of the 21st century. However, it is not always clear what actors mean when they talk about sustainability in German family policy. Therefore, this paper aims at

- (1) expanding and reflecting the definition of sustainability in German family policy concerning its *normative* and *integrative* aspects,
- (2) analyzing the implementation of *participative* aspects by pointing out challenges in actors' cooperation.⁶

In chapter 2, three of the most important publications dealing with sustainability in German family policy as well as 32 interview transcripts are analyzed concerning the understanding of sustainability reflected in these texts. In a second step, this chapter has a look at the question in how far scientific findings are integrated into relevant actors' understanding of sustainability by putting emphasis on *normative* and *integrative* aspects of sustainability. As we will see, sustainability discourse is strongly connected to major societal and political developments that occurred in the last few years. That is why it can even be argued that sustainability discourse in German family policy is not only an end in itself but can also be considered as a means to other ends.

Chapter 3 concentrates on the *participative* aspect of sustainability in the way that it deals with questions of cooperation between relevant actors. First, recent changes concerning the actor-centered level of German family policy are pointed out. Second, cooperation between relevant societal and state actors is outlined. It is shown that even though there are good reasons for and apt instruments of cooperation, interviewees identify several factors that may have a negative impact on their relationships and thereby

⁶ In both cases, the analysis is based on 32 interviews conducted with relevant societal and state actors. These semi-structured interviews were recorded and afterwards transliterated. Additionally, in chapter 2, normative and integrative aspects of sustainability are studied on the basis of three of the most important expertises in this area (BMFSFJ 2003; BMFSFJ 2005; BMFSFJ 2006). Theoretical findings as well as findings from the interviews and from the expertises were integrated into a set of variables. They were parameterized in several categories such as 'understanding of sustainability', 'dimensions of sustainability' and 'normative criteria of sustainability'.

affect the cooperation's quality. Using the example of the *Lokale Bündnisse für Familie*⁷, an initiative bringing together state and societal actors on the local level, it is put emphasis on the fact that – contrary to what is suggested in sustainability discourse – unconventional networks between state and societal actors cannot without any restriction be considered to be sustainable ones. Chapter 4 gives a résumé.

2. What is meant by 'sustainable family policy'?

Defining sustainability in family policy is not evident since contrary to other policy fields like environmental policy, questions of sustainability sort of have been imposed on family policy: It seems that after the elaboration of the national sustainability strategy in 2002, political actors were more or less constrained to identify a link between sustainability and their own policy field. In German family policy, the topic of sustainability is mostly dealt with in publications edited by the Federal Family Ministry. The most important of them are analyzed in the following. However, according to theoretical requirements concerning actors' participation, it is not enough to just consider publications when trying to define sustainability. That is why this chapter also takes into consideration interviews conducted with relevant societal and state actors and their attitudes to the topic of sustainable family policy.

Written by Rürup and Gruescu in 2003, the first expertise edited by the Federal Family Ministry (BMFSFJ) dealing with sustainability in family policy is strongly marked by economic aspects. In fact, it has been commissioned parallel to upcoming changes in the welfare system, announced by the Agenda 2010⁸ as well as by the Lisbon Strategy⁹. Concretely, the expertise brings in the term of sustainability for the first time in a scientific, family policy-related context.¹⁰ Its definition strongly stresses an economic point of view, taking into account demographic changes by focusing on the question of fertil-

⁷ Set up in 2004 by the Federal Family Ministry and co-financed by the European Social Fund, this initiative aims at bringing together actors that affect families' lives on a local level (for further details see <http://lokale-buendnisse-fuer-familie.de/>).

⁸ Inaugurated in 2003 by the red-green government, the Agenda 2010 aims at boosting the ailing economy by fostering the restructuring of the welfare system, e.g. concerning labor market regulations, health care benefits and the pension system.

⁹ In 2000, the European Council wrote down its goal to "become the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world, capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion" in the Lisbon Strategy (see http://www.consilium.europa.eu/ueDocs/cms_Data/docs/pressData/en/ec/00100-r1.en0.htm).

¹⁰ Thus, the term has already been discussed in 2002 in the context of the elaboration of a national sustainability strategy, for example on an event hosted by the Bundesministerium für Familie, Senioren, Frauen und Jugend (BMFSFJ – Federal Ministry for Family, Senior Citizens, Women and Young People) in 2002, bringing together all sorts of political and non-political actors (BMFSFJ 2002).

ity rates. Two years later, Bertram et al. expanded this definition given by Rürup and Gruescu by taking into account not only economic and demographic but also sociological arguments. In addition, the authors put a focus on the instruments family policy actors should take into consideration when wanting to reach sustainability. In parts, Bertram et al. seem to distance themselves from Rürup and Gruescu, e.g. when they state that a sustainable family policy should not only be legitimized by questions of fertility rates (BMSFJ 2005: 47). When this expertise was published in 2005, a scientific committee (amongst them also Bertram) already worked on the third main publication in this field – the Seventh Family Report.¹¹ In the report, experts state that major changes in the German society (like the transition from industrial to service society) make that family policy and its instruments have to be reconsidered. They criticize that existing instruments do not fit different familial situations but concentrate on a traditional ideal of family and marriage. In addition, family policy activities as a whole do not seem to be coherent to the experts (BMFSFJ 2006: 57). As a consequence and similar to what Bertram et al. (2005) state, the expert committee argues for a policy that takes into account special needs and demands that may occur in one life situation but not in another one. In the report, the committee deals with the question of sustainability in an own chapter in which it mainly stresses the importance of families for society and claims for a balance between waged work and (unpaid) care-work (BMFSFJ 2006: 245ff.).

This first look at the three expertises already reveals that the understanding of sustainability seems to have evolved. In fact, it looks as if it has become a more sophisticated one over the years, concentrating exclusively on economic aspects in the first place and broadening this perspective in the following years. But in order to come closer to the concept and to concretize its definition, the expertises as well as the interviews conducted with relevant state and societal actors are analyzed concerning their *understanding of sustainability* in family policy. Furthermore, the same data are analyzed concerning theoretical components: Is there any link made to sustainability research criteria? Are main elements of sustainability (e.g. ecologic, economic and social dimensions and normative criteria like intra- and intergenerational justice, preservation of quality of life

¹¹ Written by experts and edited by the family ministry, Family Reports are facing an increasing scientification (Kaufmann 2007: 380). What is new about the Seventh Family Report is the combination of macro and micro sociological perspectives as well as the integration of international comparisons (Huinink 2007: 391). In addition, for the first time, societal actors were integrated into the process of elaboration.

and persistence of the system) integrated into the experts' and interviewees' understanding of sustainability?¹²

2.1. Understanding of sustainability in the context of family policy

In terms of sustainability in family policy, Rürup and Gruescu state that demographic changes (will) have an impact on social security systems as well as on the labor market. In order to face them, the authors advise to reduce the shortage of skilled labor by strengthening female labor market integration. Secondly, they emphasize that if relevant actors aim at insuring a high quantity of potential employees in the future, child care facilities should be expanded. In addition, they state that a parental benefit should be introduced. According to the authors, both measures could contribute to an increasing total fertility rate.¹³ By reaching these goals – they argue – family policy would contribute to economic growth and could therefore be considered to be sustainable.¹⁴

Bertram et al. apply a more differentiated definition, not taking into consideration solely economic and demographic but also sociological aspects. Generally, they stress the topic of generational justice. Furthermore, the authors discuss how sustainability could be reached (BMFSFJ 2005: 7ff.). For them, family policy should consist of a mix of time policy, financial transfers and infrastructural support (BMFSFJ 2005: 7). To resume, their understanding of sustainability is one of a target group-specific policy that they suppose to be more efficient than 'one fits it all' solutions.

Similar to Bertram et al., also the Seventh Family Report defines sustainable family policy as consisting of a mix of time policy, infrastructural support and financial transfers. Within this mix of instruments, the committee underlines the importance of time-related measures though, including their adaptation to special situations that might occur in the course of life (BMFSFJ 2006: 266ff.). The experts put the question of sustainability in a wider perspective and apply a more sophisticated understanding of sustainability than previous expertises (Huinink 2007: 392). In fact, they consider resources of families to be finite. In addition, the expert committee states that as families have a

¹² These questions are operationalized by using the criteria 'understanding of sustainability', 'dimensions of sustainability' and 'normative criteria of sustainability'. Information concerning these topics was extracted from the interview transcripts and expertises with the help of the software MIA (Gläser/Laudel 2009).

¹³ Both aspects – the question of getting children and of female labor market integration – can, if you believe the expertise, be explained by economic means (see the concept of opportunity costs).

¹⁴ Interestingly, this argumentation contradicts 'traditional' family policy measures (e.g. married couples tax splitting) that can be rated as aiming – amongst others – at an increasing fertility rate by means of a low female labor market integration rate.

positive impact on the society as a whole, their resources should be cherished (BMFSFJ 2006: 247). This is even truer against the background of major societal changes that have occurred in the recent past (e.g. globalization, the developing of a knowledge society). The Seventh Family Report goes further than the other two expertises, not only describing what sustainability (should) mean(s) or defining its instruments, but also stating what changes would be necessary on a structural and on an actor-centered level in order to reach sustainability in German family policy (BMFSFJ 2006: 280ff.). However, it stays nebulous in some ways and does not give a really consistent definition of what sustainability in family policy means. In some parts, the experts' reasoning is very concrete – e.g. when they underline the fact that child poverty, traditional role models and the breadwinner model do not contribute to sustainability (BMFSFJ 2006: 246ff.) – in some parts it is more or less nebulous – e.g. when experts stress that sustainability in family policy means reliability (BMFSFJ 2006: 261). Additionally, when it comes to the important question of how sustainability could be reached, they refer to measures that have already been pointed out by Bertram et al. (BMFSFJ 2005). In fact, one can assume that the report's focus concerning sustainability differs according to the respective author of each passage. This impression is reinforced by an interviewee (member of the expert committee), stating that it was not the purpose of the Report to find a consistent definition of sustainability (W3).¹⁵

Analyzing the interviews under the same aspects shows that there is a very heterogeneous understanding of sustainability, too. Basically, sustainability is said to be a synonym for a good working style in the policy making process (B2; L2) respectively a scientific method taking into consideration past and future (SP2), including a long term perspective (B1; B5; L2; K1; K5; W1; W3; VV4; VV6; VV7; S1; J1), coherence (W1; W2; VV7) and reliability of measures (B3; VV2; VV8) while reaching the intended effects (B1; B2; B5; VV2; W1; W3; SP3; J1), for example by evaluating measures (B4; W1; W3) and making political processes transparent (SP3). Furthermore, interviewees state that a sustainable family policy should consider the lack of (human) resources (B3) as well as families' social environment (L1) and consist of a life-long support for families (B3). Some interviewees also emphasize that sustainability means avoiding unidimen-

¹⁵ 'W3' is used as acronym for *Wissenschaft* (science), third interview conducted in this actor group. In the following, *B* stands for *Bund* (central state level), *L* stands for *Land* (federal state level), *K* for *Kommune* (local level), *VV* for *Verbände und Vereine* (organizations and associations), *SP* for *Sozialpartner* (social partners), *S* for *Stiftungen* (foundations) and *J* for *Justiz* (justice). All in all, 32 interviews were conducted: six in the group *B*, four in the group *L*, five in the group *K*, nine in the group *VV*, three in the group *W*, three in the group *SP*, one in the group *S* and one in the group *J*.

sionality, caused e.g. by the integration of too few actors or ideas (SP2; VV9; S1; J1). In addition, sustainability is referred to as being an instrument for facilitating gender equity (SP1; VV1; VV2; VV8) as well as equality in the educational and in the social system (SP1) respectively (financial) independence of families (VV6; VV8). Also, some interviewees indicate that a sustainable family policy should make possible that desires for children can be realized (VV2; VV8).

The goals of sustainability mentioned go from an increasing fertility (B3; L1) and a decreasing poverty rate (B3; VV2) to an increasing satisfaction rate of families (L1; VV3). Some of the interviewees even emphasize that a sustainable family policy should be more than just an increase of fertility and female labor integration rate respectively a decrease of children poverty rate (VV2; VV3). For one of them, sustainability in the context of family policy means that relevant actors consider existing families, their needs and problems and do not exclusively concentrate on (potential) future ones (VV3). Generally, interviewees state that these goals could be attained by strengthening family policy and social networks (L1; L2) as well as by enabling families to live their individual lives without forcing them to follow ideal types of family (VV3). Furthermore, interviewees think that it is important to implement necessary reforms (B6) and legal prescriptions (VV3) as well as to apply a mix of instruments, consisting of time policy, infrastructural support and financial transfers (B3; VV3; VV7).

The topic of financial means is picked out as a central theme by the interviewees in the context of sustainability. Some of them state that there should be a decreasing debt rate (B4; L1) and less project-related financing (in contrast to long term financing; L1; W1; VV2) respectively a financial situation which does not depend on political decisions (K1). So for some of the interviewees, sufficient financial means are a precondition to sustainability (B1) but another one states that since there is less money, networking and innovative processes are developing in a better way. Interestingly, he considers this lack of money to foster cooperation between actors which he sees to be a precondition to sustainability (L2). Also, one interviewee states that the simple fact of saving money does not imperatively lead to sustainability. To his mind, (financially) investing in the future is as important as saving money (in certain realms; SP2). Besides money, structural interdependencies are also considered to have an influence on sustainability. For instance, VV2 states that federalism is opposed to sustainability. However, one interviewee assumes that often political actors really aim at reaching sustainability. Yet, to his mind, they lack of courage which would be necessary to create coherence in family

policy measures (being a precondition of sustainability). As a consequence, the interviewee sees a difference between political actor's ambitions and the reality (VV7).

All in all, it is interesting to see that some of the interviewees have a rather precise understanding of sustainability – most of the times referring to the original environmental concept (B2; B3; L1; K5; VV4; VV5; VV7; VV8; S1), some of them referring to (one of) the three expertises mentioned above (B3; VV2; VV3; VV7; W2) or to similar concepts (e.g. family mainstreaming; VV8) – whereas quite a lot of them state that sustainability in family policy is just a buzzword to them (B3; L1; K5; VV4; VV6; VV7; S1; SP3). Their impression is highlighted by what S1 and VV7 think of the concept of sustainability in German family policy: “Basically, I consider that every political measure should be sustainable. Because if not – what would be the sense behind it?” (S1).¹⁶ “Sustainability in the context of political actions? I cannot hear this word anymore! Because everyone who tries to sell something says: And it is also sustainable. But nobody really knows what ‘sustainable’ means. For me, every political measure should be sustainable. To me, that is a basic requirement” (VV7). Some interviewees even state that they (deliberately) do not use the term of sustainability in the context of family policy (S1; SP3; VV6; W3). In addition to that, one of them emphasizes that to his mind it would not be useful to have a strict definition of sustainability since the term refers more to a political than to a scientific concept (W3).

In fact, the precedent paragraphs revealed that there is a very heterogeneous understanding of sustainability in the context of family policy in the expertises as well as amongst the interviewees. In order to really grasp what actors mean when they talk about sustainability in family policy, it makes sense to take a look at references made to sustainability research criteria. The following paragraph shows in how far experts and interviewees address the three *dimensions* of sustainability (ecologic, economic and social) and its *normative criteria* (intra- and intergenerational justice, preservation of quality of life and persistence of the system).¹⁷

¹⁶ All of the following citations were translated by the author.

¹⁷ This question is operationalized by using the categories ‘dimensions of sustainability’ and ‘normative criteria of sustainability’. The third main theoretical requirement – *participation* of all relevant actors – is dealt with in chapter 3.

2.2. Scientific requirements and the understanding of sustainability

As sustainability research states, sustainability should include at least three dimensions: an ecological, an economic and a social one (*integrative* aspect of sustainability). So on a theoretical level, there is a lack of complexity mainly in the expertise of Rürup and Gruescu (BMFSFJ 2003) that refers exclusively to economic aspects of sustainability. Although this emphasis is put into perspective at the end of the expertise (BMFSFJ 2003: 51), the other two dimensions are not mentioned. As explained above, the definition given by Bertram et al. (BMFSFJ 2005) is already a little more differentiated. However, only in the Seventh Family Report (BMFSFJ 2006), all three dimensions are mentioned in the context of sustainability. For example, the expert committee emphasizes that ecological factors like environmental pollution have an impact on the families' quality of life (BMFSFJ 2006: 160). Also, it states that on a socio-ecological level, relations to parents and to a wider social network are important for a child's development (BMFSFJ 2006: 186). Against this background, the committee asks for a reform of urban development policy which overcomes the segregation of private and professional life that had been established as an answer to industrialization in the 19th century (BMFSFJ 2006: 191). On an economic level, the experts state that families have a positive impact on society and thus may not be disadvantaged financially (BMFSFJ 2006: 262).

Some of the interviewees also consider ecological, economic and social aspects of sustainability, although none of them refers to all three of them. One emphasizes that on an *economic* level, money could be saved on the long run when investing into family policy related areas (B1). Another one makes a link between family policy and the demand for employment (L1). Others emphasize that sustainability in family policy means to financially support families (B3) and enables them to be financially independent (VV6; VV8). In addition, a decreasing debt rate (B4; L1), investing in family-related realms (SP2) as well as less project-related financing (L1, W1; VV2) are referred to as being indicators for sustainability in family policy. Concerning the *social* dimension, the interviewees state for instance that support is needed in the area of social benefits (B1). For some of them, sustainability in family policy also means that family poverty rates decrease (B3; VV2). Others also refer to gender equity (VV1; VV2; VV8; SP1) and to equality in the social system in general and in the educational system in particular (SP1). Concerning the *ecological* aspect of sustainability, one interviewee states that a

family friendly environment, including playgrounds for instance, should be part of a sustainable policy (L1).

Tab. 1: Dimensions of sustainability

	ecological dimension	economic dimension	social dimension
BMFSFJ 2003	No	Yes	No
BMFSFJ 2005	No	Yes	Yes
BMFSFJ 2006	Yes	Yes	Yes
Interviews	L1	B1; B3; B4; L1; VV2; VV6; VV8; SP2; W1	B1; B3; VV1; VV2; VV8; SP1

Source: Own listing

To put it in a nutshell, none of the interviewees refers to all three dimensions of sustainability. The Seventh Family Report is the only expertise relating to the ecological, the economic as well as to the social dimension. In addition, it is obvious that both expertises and interviews predominantly refer to economic aspects when it comes to the question of sustainability in family policy. In contrast, as table 1 shows, the ecological dimension is underrepresented.

Concerning the *normative criteria* of sustainability (intra- and intergenerational justice, preservation of quality of life and persistence of the system), most of the times at least one of them is included in the interviewees' and experts' understanding of sustainability in family policy. However, the expertise of Rürup and Gruescu (BMFSFJ 2003) does only refer to the question of survival of the welfare system (endangered by demographic changes). In addition to that, Bertram et al. put an emphasis on generational justice (BMFSFJ 2005: 6ff.). Also the Seventh Family Report speaks of intra- and intergenerational justice in the context of sustainability (BMFSFJ 2006: 92; 105ff.), e.g. when dealing with the question of care or heritage (BMFSFJ 2006: 142f.; 147ff.). In addition, the expert committee states that a better quality of life can be reached when an efficient time policy (as part of sustainability) is applied (BMFSFJ 2006: 210).

Also in the interviews, *generational justice* is an important topic when it comes to sustainability. One interviewee for example states that family policy measures (like parental benefit or married couples tax splitting) can cause intragenerational injustice (B1). The same interviewee also underlines that in terms of intra- and intergenerational justice, it is important to maintain the social security system (B1). In addition, two others emphasize that a decreasing poverty rate is an indicator of sustainability of family policy measures (B3; VV2). Also, gender equity (VV1; VV2; VV8; SP1) and equality in

the educational/social system (SP1) are considered to be important. L1 states that applying these things to people's actual living situations, multi-generational living concepts could be the right answer in terms of generational justice. For SP1 it is important that people of all ages are integrated into the policy making process. VV8 and W2 even go further by claiming that upcoming generations should also be considered.

Concerning the *quality of life*, some of the interviewees underline that political measures making the realization of desires for children easier are important (B1; B3; VV2; VV8). Also, an increasing satisfaction rate of families is considered to be important in terms of sustainability (L1; VV3). Two interviewees state that in the context of quality of life, it is important not only to consider (potential) future families but problems and needs of those who are already existing (B1; VV3), e.g. by investing in infrastructures rather than in financial support (B1).

The aspect of *persistence of the system* is mentioned in the context of demographic changes, requiring e.g. a higher fertility rate, as well (B2; B3; L1). Three interviewees state that to their mind, this higher fertility rate could be realized when making efforts in other policy fields, e.g. in labor policy (B1; B2; L1). Also B3 emphasizes that if we want everything to go on as we are used to, family policy must include demographic aspects. For VV3 it is important to acknowledge the benefits of families for the social security system.

Tab. 2: Normative criteria of sustainability

	intra- & intergenerational justice	preservation of quality of life	persistence of the system
BMFSFJ 2003	No	No	Yes
BMFSFJ 2005	Yes	No	Yes
BMFSFJ 2006	Yes	Yes	Yes
Interviews	B1; B3; L1; VV1; VV2; VV8; W2; SP1	B1; B3; L1; VV2; VV3; VV8	B1; B2; B3; L1; VV3

Source: Own listing

Table 2 reveals that as for the dimensions of sustainability (see table 1), also in the case of the normative criteria, the Seventh Family Report is the only expertise addressing all three of them. However, despite of the fact that it is all-embracing, the Report is not coherent in its definition of sustainability (see above). It seems as if the simple fact that it measures 296 pages and that eight experts worked on it for two and a half years necessarily makes that all the important elements are covered. Concerning the interviewees,

three of them (B1; B3 and L1) refer to all three normative aspects of sustainability. However – as for the dimensions of sustainability (see table 1) – most of the interviewed person did not refer to one single normative criterion of sustainability and are therefore not even listed in the table.

If we just take a look at the state actors (B, L and K) in the two tables above, it is interesting to observe that the complexity in their understanding of sustainability seems to decrease with a decreasing federal level: Most of the actors coming from the highest federal level (*Bund*) refer to aspects identified by sustainability research, e.g. to dimensions and to normative criteria, when relating to the concept of sustainability. Their comparatively complex understanding of sustainability is visualized in table 1 and 2. In contrast, actors coming from the federal states (*Länder*) are less present in the tables. Last but not least, interviewees coming from the local level (*Kommune*) cannot be found in the tables at all. As federal actors seem to deal more with the topic of sustainability, it can be assumed that the concept is more important to them than to local actors. However, this does not imperatively mean that all of them really grasped the concept of sustainability in the context of family policy, as W2 emphasizes: “In my opinion, the term of sustainability has been successful in academic discourses. In contrast, I feel that the concept has not really been understood by most of the political actors”. Indeed, actors’ very heterogeneous understanding of sustainability in German family policy does not fit with the pretended relevance put forward in sustainability discourse. This fact leads to the assumption that sustainability in German family policy is not (only) a concrete ambition in itself but (also) a means to other ends.

2.3. Sustainability discourse in German family policy – a means to other ends?

As already mentioned above, sustainability discourse came up parallel to European and national incidences that affected German family policy. On EU-level, the Council of the European Union adopted the Lisbon Strategy which, from a family policy point of view, attests that efforts should be made in the field of integration of women into the labor market as well as concerning “a new benchmark for improved childcare provision” (European Council 2000). On national level, the Agenda 2010 (inaugurated in 2003) aimed at reforming the social security system, amongst others in order to face demographic changes (Bundesregierung 2003: 6). In both cases, experts and politicians ap-

parently had come to the conclusion that a reorganization of (parts of) the welfare system had become necessary.

Having remained small and relatively insignificant with a “little number of employees, little money and little legislative competence”, representing little influence (Ristau 2005: 21) in this period, also the Federal Family Ministry has been affected by these decisions which could potentially have had resulted in cost containment measures. Against this background, family policy actors had to rethink their strategies for the future and called out a ‘new’ or so called ‘sustainable’ family policy which should not only establish strategic networks and integrate new actors like social partners (e.g. in the *Allianz für die Familie*¹⁸) but also include economic and demographic argumentation as well as an evaluation of family policy measure (Ristau 2005: 22; BMFSFJ 2003; BMFSFJ 2005; BMFSFJ 2006).¹⁹

Strangely, lots of these aspects and measures emphasized in the context of sustainability discourse in family policy seem to go back to national or European concepts that do not imperatively have something to do with family policies in the first place. In fact, it seems that sustainability discourse in German family policy did not only start at the same time but that there is also a link between its coming up and the national respectively supranational developments mentioned above with regard to content. For example, Ristau²⁰ (2005: 17) and Kohli (2007: 396) underline that there is indeed a close link between changes in family policy and the Agenda 2010. As an example, Ristau stresses that the children’s allowance (*Kinderzuschlag*), already written down in the Agenda 2010 and inaugurated in 2005, follows the same principles (*Fördern und Fordern* i.e. giving support and making demands) than the Agenda as a whole (Ristau 2005: 21). Additionally, there are parallels between the reform of unemployment benefits and the new parental benefit, inaugurated in 2007 – both of them are income-related and paid only for a relatively short period (Ristau 2005: 22). Also, the expansion of childcare facilities – as one main element of sustainability discourse – had already been mentioned in the Agenda 2010.

¹⁸ The *Allianz für die Familie* had been initiated in 2003 by the Bertelsmann Foundation and by the Federal Family Ministry. It consolidates activities concerning the reconciliation of work and family life realized by economic and societal actors. All in all, the *Allianz* aims at reaching changes in mindsets by disseminating examples of best practices (for further details see <http://www.work-life.at/pdf/wlb/0300-GrundPapAllianzFam.pdf>).

¹⁹ Concerning the economic aspect of this new argumentation see e.g. DIW 2002, 2003.

²⁰ Ristau, head of department (family, welfare work and commitment) in the Federal Family Ministry under Renate Schmidt as well as under Ursula von der Leyen, has also worked for former chancellor Schröder’s electoral campaign in 2002. Appointed as head of the department in the family ministry after the elections to the Bundestag, Ristau probably has been marked by the considerations concerning the upcoming Agenda 2010.

However, these external influences (e.g. Agenda 2010) are rarely mentioned in political or public discourse concerning the question of sustainability in family policy. In return, changes concerning e.g. new actor constellations (e.g. networks in which societal and state actors cooperate) or measures (e.g. parental benefit) are frequently referred to as being sustainable ones (e.g. CDU, CSU, SPD 2005: 116ff.).

Against this background, the Seventh Family Report has been considered to be a political instrument that aims at building up and maintaining acceptance for changes (Ostner 2007: 385). Going in the same direction, it could be argued that the three expertises mentioned in this chapter did not aim at seriously bringing in a concept of sustainability in German family policy. In fact, it could even be assumed – as Ostner does for the Family Report – that they are, in parts, a sort of *ex post* legitimization of changes that had been induced before on national and on European level. From this point of view, the term of sustainable family policy would be rather a label for and a legitimization of previous decisions than standing for a substantially new policy style (as stated on discursive level). However, it is arguable whether at that time relevant actors already acted in a strategic and holistic manner that would make possible such a systematical use of publications. It rather seems to be that a strategic way of thinking in German family policy came up *after* the Seventh Family Report, e.g. with the installation of the *Kompetenzzentrum für familienbezogene Leistungen* in 2006 which, for the first time, systematically listed all existing family policy measures.²¹ Against this background, it seems to be more probable that political actors simply made use of sustainability discourse in order to achieve their respective ideas and goals. Indeed, sustainability discourse seems to have supported changes: It surely helped to win over new actors, create new networks and strengthen the policy field as a whole (Ristau 2005). Nonetheless, a closer look reveals that in scientific terms, German family policy is still far away from meeting theoretical sustainability requirements (see 2.1. and 2.2.). This becomes also obvious when analyzing the interviews concerning the implementation of *participative* aspects (as third integral element of sustainability next to *normative* and *integrative* aspects).

²¹ Interestingly, the follow-up project of the *Kompetenzzentrum für familienbezogene Leistungen* (Center for family benefits – own translation) is called *Kompetenzzentrum für nachhaltige Familienpolitik* (Center for sustainable family policy – own translation).

3. Participative aspects of sustainability – between theoretical requirements and reality

In the last years, changes concerning the actor-centered level were mainly initiated by a changing understanding of family interests in German family policy. Until the end of the 1960s, these were considered to be an individual matter only. That is why, contrary to other policy fields, an arena in which political interests are articulated and discussed did not come up for a long time in German family policy (Gerlach 2009: 92). However, normative argumentation lost its importance from the 1970s on. In the 1980s and 1990s, several Federal Constitutional Court's rulings then made that (unpaid) family work was bit by bit recognized in the social security system (Gerlach 2000). Today, family issues are no longer considered to be a private matter only: Against the background of societal changes, resulting amongst others in a high old-age dependency ratio, family policy actors now stress the importance of families for the socioeconomic development (Gerlach 2009: 97; also see e.g. BMFSFJ 2006). In the same time, actors' commitment in family policy and their competences as well as their relationships were reconsidered, as the following section shows.

3.1. Recent developments on the actor-centered level

On the supranational level, the European Union expanded its influence on national family policies in the last years. Despite of its lack of formal competences in this field, it intervenes in national family policies both on a legislative and on a non-legislative level (Ahrens 2008). In addition, the EU engages in research on family policy-related questions: For example, the Commission funds the so called *Social Platform on Research for Families and Family Policies* which brings together family policy researchers “with at least 40 different stakeholder representatives, such as family associations, policy-makers or social partners” (European Commission n.d.). Established under the Seventh Framework Program, the platform aims at elaborating a research agenda, considering key policy questions and identifying research deficits. This commitment of the EU may result in an even stronger engagement in the future.

On national administrative level, there have also been changes with regard to actors and their competences. As already mentioned, reforms concerning the welfare system as a whole (e.g. the Agenda 2010) have been elaborated at the turn of the new millennium,

parallel to the coming up of sustainability discourse in family policy. Within this process, responsibilities – mainly on a communicative²² level though – have been passed on to new actor constellations, e.g. to unconventional networks like the *Allianz für die Familie* or the *Lokale Bündnisse für Familie*. At the same time, the federal ministry bypassed constitutional requirements concerning its formal competences at some points, e.g. concerning the expansion of childcare facilities.²³ As a result, federal states and local authorities had to cede some of their influence to the central state.

Additionally, family policy-related issues have gained importance for the electoral process: Poll results are said to have had an influence on the commitment of parties to family policy under former chancellor Gerhard Schröder (B3). As shown above, the relation between Social and Christian Democrats in terms of family policy has traditionally been marked by important differences in their understanding with the Christian Democrats concentrating on the family as an institution and the Social Democrats supporting individual members of the family. The ideologisation resulting from these different points of view began to decrease already in the 1980s, although it could be observed until the 1990s (Gerlach 2006: 93). However, since the turn of the new millennium, strong ideological differences seem to only show up in some rare cases (Gerlach 2010: 156ff.), mainly shortly before elections (Ahrens/Blum 2009: 6). Thus, party congruence is currently on a very high level.

In contrast, the Constitutional Court – another important actor in German family policy – is not constrained by electoral motives but seems to follow rather policy-seeking ones. This is, amongst others, due to the fact that its work concentrates on the question if measures meet constitutional requirements or not (Ahrens/Blum 2009). In the 1990s, it has argued with several rulings for a better representation of families' interests (Gerlach

²² In contrast to financial transfer and jurisdictional prescriptions – all three of them traditional instruments of family policies (Gerlach 2010: 141f.)

²³ Although the federal states and the local level are competent in this field, the decision that childcare facilities should be expanded was taken on the central state level: In 2007, the federal government decided to financially support the federal states and the local level in the expansion of childcare facilities with four billion Euros (Deutscher Bundestag 2007). However, the Länder are not constrained to use the money for the construction of childcare facilities. The relevant bill (*Kinderförderungsgesetz*; 2008) changes a bill on financial compensation (*Finanzausgleichsgesetz*) between the central state and the federal states. Akin to the federal state's interference with questions of childcare facilities, the federal government also bypassed constitutional requirements when it decided to launch the initiative *Lokale Bündnisse für Familie* in 2004: According to the Constitutional Law, the federal state can only affect the local level via the federal states. However, interference is possible if the local level's participation takes place on a voluntary base only. By resorting to this exception, the federal government managed to implement the *Lokale Bündnisse für Familie* on the local level.

2000).²⁴ Thus, it has gained influence, particularly in the 1990s, without expanding its formal competences though. Gerlach even considers the Court's rulings to be a major reason for changes in terms of interest articulation (Gerlach 2009: 90ff.).

Additional to these state actors, societal actors like interest groups (e.g. family organizations) are also relevant in the policy making process. Generally, their influence seems to have increased in the last years, beginning with the International Year of the Family that had been proclaimed by the United Nations General Assembly in 1994 (Gerlach 2009: 96). In the 1990s, family organizations have supported or initiated several complaints that led to important family policy-related rulings by the Constitutional Court. Additionally and parallel to the parties, normative argumentation has lost importance for family organizations as well (Gerlach 2009: 96f.). However, their potential of enforcement remains relatively low. This is mainly due to diversification and heterogeneity in family interests (Gerlach 2009: 104). On the contrary, other interest groups have seen their influence increasing. In the context of a more economic argumentation in the policy field (reflected e.g. in table 1), social partners – namely labor unions and employers' associations, traditionally not associated to this policy field – have gained importance. It was mainly the employers' associations that pointed out the relation between changes in family structures and their economic consequences, provoked by a shortage of skilled labor force (SP2). This argumentation has become the basis for economic aspects in sustainability discourse. All in all, the social partners' importance in the legislative process seems to be higher than the one of other interest groups (SP3). Emphasizing similar aspects, also individual actors like companies or foundations can record an increasing importance in the last few years.

Additional to these changes, networks have been established, reassembling e.g. (local) politicians, social partners, interest groups and individual actors (e.g. *Lokale Bündnisse für Familie*, *Allianz für die Familie*, *Bundesforum Familie*²⁵). It can be assumed that following Bonoli (2003), this process has been fostered by upcoming socioeconomic transformations and financial shortages that have generated new social risks (like single parenthood or career interruptions due to childbearing) and that concern a highly heterogeneous group. As a large minority of the population is (potentially) affected by

²⁴ Currently, the ruling on the *Hartz IV* legislation in February 2010 marked the end of a nearly ten years lasting period in which the Court did hardly intervene in family policy-related questions.

²⁵ Financed by the Federal Family Ministry, the *Bundesforum Familie* consists of more than 100 actors, e.g. family associations, social partners or foundations which work together on a project-related basis, dealing with topics like values, migration or media and their consequences for families (for further details see <http://www.bundesforum-familie.de/>).

these new social risks and as social programs covering them are cheaper than programs covering 'regular' risks, politicians and employers tend to support them (Bonoli 2005: 441). Following Bonoli (2005: 443f.), this attitude to new social risks facilitates the creation of new, unconventional networks. Changes in the federal ministry's strategy concerning the initiation of networks in general and the integration of actors like employers' associations in particular can be seen in this context.

In this paper, networks are defined as "a set of nodes and the set of ties representing some relationship, or lack of relationship, between the nodes" (Brass et al. 2004), consisting of network participants "that come together through the establishment of social contracts or agreements [...] rather than legally binding contracts" (Provan et al. 2007; cf. Alter/Hage 1993; Jones et al. 1997) and cooperate, aiming at achieving their individual goals but also collective ones (Provan/Kenis 2007). Until the 1970s, markets were considered to be the only efficient form of nonhierarchical cooperation (Williamson 1975). Perceived as combination of aspects of market and hierarchy in the first place, networks were considered to be a unique form of governance some time later (Powell 1990). Nowadays, they are regarded as "a response to failures of markets, failures of hierarchical coordination, and to societal and technological developments. The implication was, and continues to be, that despite problems, networks in general can produce positive outcomes that would not be possible in a market or a hierarchy." (Provan/Kenis 2007: 233).

This assumption is also dominant in sustainability discourse in German family policy in the framework of which the existence and increasing number of these unconventional networks is frequently referred to as being a success in terms of cooperation and said to be an indicator for sustainability (e.g. Ristau 2005: 22; BMFSFJ 2006a). At first glance, the fact that network building and thereby cooperation between actors is fostered indeed meets theoretical requirements of sustainability by taking into account its participative, bottom-up character (Renn et al. 2007: 74). However, it can be argued that the quantity of networks respectively of network partners should not be the only indicator. Akin to the cooperation between state actors on different federal levels (see Ahrens forthcoming), also for the question of state-societal cooperation, it is important to consider the quality of relationships, judged by involved actors.²⁶ It is argued that this one should be

²⁶ In terms of sustainability, both federal (e.g. between the federal government and the federal states' governments) and societal-state cooperation (e.g. between the federal government and family organizations) are important. The following paragraphs focus on the latter. For details on the cooperation between state actors on different federal levels, see Ahrens (forthcoming).

considered to be more important than the quantity of networks or network partners when it comes to the question of sustainability. In this view, it is not only important to know *if* actors cooperate but *why* they do (not do) it and how they judge the cooperation's *quality*. That is why the aim of the following paragraphs is not to e.g. count existing networks between societal and state actors or to focus for instance on their in- and out-degree of centrality, but to identify the quality of relationships between cooperating partners. The interviews conducted with 32 relevant state and societal actors – namely the results of the category 'structural interdependencies', dealing amongst others with the topic of cooperation between relevant actors – are taken as basis for answering this question.

3.2. Cooperation between societal and state actors

Generally, the cooperation between state and societal actors can be classified into a *horizontal* and a *vertical* one. In this context, 'horizontal' stands for the fact that actors having the same or similar functional backgrounds cooperate (e.g. family organizations and/or welfare organizations). In contrast, 'vertical' describes a type of cooperation in which actors coming from (in parts very) different realms (with regard to content or to their function) come together, e.g. in the *Lokale Bündnisse für Familie* (LBfF) where administrative, political, societal and individual actors meet. Depending on a network's specific form of governance (cf. Provan/Kenis 2007), both vertical and horizontal cooperation types can have a different degree of hierarchization, meaning that one cooperation partner dominates the other one(s). As the interviews reveal, this domination can be based e.g. on aspects of legitimacy, on financial dependences or on a disequilibrium of knowledge and result in a situation in which e.g. the dominating actor tends to influence the other one(s) with regard to content. Networks between societal and state actors that have been established in the last few years in German family policy were probably initiated by decision makers in order to overcome the hierarchical structures of 'regular' forms of cooperation (e.g. between the Federal Family Ministry and the family organizations) and in order to produce positive outcomes that are supposed not be possible in a situation of market or hierarchy. As a consequence and according to the interviewees, the cooperation between state and societal actors that has traditionally been based more on functional aspects (e.g. the fact of being a family organization potentially enables them to join the *Arbeitsgemeinschaft der deutschen Familienorganisationen* AGF – the

consortium of German family organizations) has evolved towards a rather topic-related one in the last years (e.g. VV5; VV6; VV8; SP2).

As within sustainability discourse, the foundation of networks is fostered and as vertical forms of cooperation are frequently referred to as being a form of cooperation insuring sustainability (e.g. in the context of the *Lokale Bündnisse für Familie*; Ristau 2005: 22; BMFSFJ 2006a), they are put emphasis on in the following. In this view, the first part of this section asks for general statements of interviewees concerning the question of cooperation between state and societal actors and concerning the actors' assessment of relationships (3.2.1.). It reveals that although actors identify different reasons for and instruments of cooperation, there are several aspects that influence actors' relationships and thereby may restrain or facilitate the cooperation between them. Using the example of the *Lokale Bündnisse für Familie* (LBfF), the second part deals with the relationship of actors in unconventional networks, bringing together state and societal actors (3.2.2.). It shows that – contrary to what is suggested in sustainability discourse – these networks may not just like that be considered to be sustainable ones.

3.2.1. Cooperation between state and societal actors judged by the interviewees

Generally, an analysis of the interviews concerning the question of cooperation between state and societal actors in general and their opinion concerning relevant actors' relationships in particular reveals that interviewees refer to

- (1) their individual reasons for cooperation,
- (2) instruments of cooperation, and
- (3) aspects which may influence actors' relationships and thereby shape the cooperation between them.

Of course, their statements reflect a very subjective point of view and cannot be generalized. However, interviewees outline what relevant actors think about the quality of relationships in networks they are involved in. For as already mentioned above, it is not enough to only know who cooperates with whom,²⁷ but rather to see *why* actors (do not) cooperate and how they judge their relationships' *quality*. As this question is highly subjective, the term of 'quality' is not further operationalized in this context.

Generally, concerning the question of cooperation between societal and state actors, it is interesting to see that most of the interviewees refer to it as a positive aspect. At first

²⁷ Basically, every interviewed person indicated to cooperate with relevant actors coming from the same federal level, whereas cooperation trespassing different federal levels is generally limited to intra-actor cooperation (e.g. between a federal family organization and its members coming from the federal states).

glance, interviewed actors go in the same direction as sustainability researchers when they state that cooperation and networks are important to them (e.g. B2; L1; L3; L4; VV2; VV3; VV5; SP1; J1).

(1) When it comes to the reasons for cooperation, interviewees mainly refer to the aspect of assertiveness, in the way that they indicate to cooperate with others in order to firstly spread and secondly implement their point of view. Interestingly, there are differences between (state and societal) actors in the question of how they concretely perceive and use cooperation. While societal actors indicate they make use of cooperation mainly in order *convince decision makers* of their individual goals, state actors rather tend to use cooperation and the integration of relevant (societal) actors in order to communicate their plans and to *achieve societal acceptance*.

Concerning their individual reasons for cooperation, representatives from family organizations generally approve that cooperation between societal actors makes it more probable for them to implement their goals (e.g. VV3), mainly if their organization is small (VV2). In addition, cooperation can be attractive if participants think that by combining their energy, they get more attention from other (e.g. political) actors (SP1). Also state actors use cooperation for strategic purposes (VV2; W2). B3 for instance indicates that cooperating is important in order to achieve societal acceptance (see also W1). Also L2 agrees that if one wants e.g. to implement family policy as topic of overriding importance in governmental negotiation processes, it is important to boost cooperation between relevant actors. In addition to that, several societal actors accuse state actors of using networks as a sort of marketing instrument: According to W3 and W1, changes in the cooperation between the Federal Family Ministry and scientists are mainly due to the fact that in the last years, the ministry asks for the experts to consider public relations-related aspects in their expertises. W2 goes in the same direction when he assumes that the integration of societal actors in the elaboration process of the Seventh Family Report, initiated by the Federal Family Ministry, has happened in order to enhance the reception of the Report. According to him, cooperation was not initiated with the aim to learn from each other. "It seemed to me that they [the ministry; R.A.] wanted to get rid of critics. I think this was because they wanted the project to succeed. In fact, it was a question of marketing. If you are sympathetic to this approach you might say that it was good to include further experts. But if you are more critical, you might rather think of it as marketing purpose" (W2). Also SP3 emphasizes that to his mind, cooperation seems to be a sort of means to other (publicity) ends to state actors.

This attitude can also have an influence on cooperation between societal actors: SP3 states that generally he or his colleagues are involved very early in the legislative process. But according to him, this mainly happens in order to insure the social partners' acceptance: "[...] sometimes they sort of buy us in order to make their own decisions socially acceptable, in order to get bigger publicity" (SP3). Despite of this cooperation between societal actors being fostered by state actors, differences between (in this case) employers' organizations and labor unions persist "which – in some cases – leads to big problems in the process of cooperation" (SP3). As this statement shows, even if societal actors are included or if their cooperation is fostered by state actors, this does not mean that their needs and demands are fully respected by the decision makers. VV3 goes in the same direction when he states that cooperating with the Federal Family Ministry is not always easy for his organization. According to him, this is not only true when both actors have different opinions with regard to content. VV3 also emphasizes that the predominance of marketing purposes in the ministry's decisions is responsible for these problems in cooperation.

(2) As specific instrument of cooperation, the *exchange of information and knowledge* is used by actors, e.g. in the case in which they share what they know about upcoming legislative initiatives which the Family Ministry does not inform all societal actors about (VV2). Social partners and some family and welfare organizations also exchange knowledge and information on a topic-related basis in order to be more independent from state actors (SP1). In the same perspective, VV5 states that working together with scientists makes sense for family organizations since scientific findings can give a sort of long term perspective to family organizations' claims (VV5). Also, the exchange of information and knowledge may be attractive if one cooperation partner needs specific expertise which can e.g. be provided by scientists (L2). According to several interviewees, this cooperation between scientists and political actors is important since the latter's opinions are mostly based on individual experiences. So even if scientists are sometimes sort of misused in order to confirm political actor's points of view (e.g. in parliamentary hearings; W1; B6; SP3; VV4), this instrument of cooperation is considered to be important. In the same view, VV8 underlines that generally, the Federal Family Ministry is interested in the family organization's opinion and sometimes takes up the organisation's ideas in its bills. As state actor, also L3 emphasizes that the ministry generally appreciates the family organizations' expertise. Akin to administrative actors, also political parties rely on the welfare/family organizations' expertise. That is why, according

to B6, they are usually willing to integrate the organizations' concerns into their interpellations. From a social partner's point of view, SP3 states that deputies are mostly happy when they receive relevant information from his organization. An exchange of information and knowledge is also relevant for the relation between political and judicial sphere (J1). However, as B5 and B6 indicate, oppositional parties rather show a higher interest in family/welfare organizations than governing parties when it comes to the question of integrating their claims into the parties' own statements.

Apart from this exchange of information and knowledge, an *exchange of employees* can also be an instrument of cooperation. As J1 specifies, there is a link between judicial and political actors amongst others in the way that many politicians have a judicial background while many jurists work in the political sphere. In addition, jurists may be invited by political actors to temporally work e.g. in a ministry in order to take care of the judicial aspects of a bill. Of course, there are also former representatives from state actors (e.g. parties' employees) that currently work for societal actors (e.g. family/welfare organizations) or the other way around.

(3) As outlined, interviewees mention different reasons for and instruments of cooperation between state and societal actors. However, most of them also state that cooperation is not always easy to realize. An analysis of the interviews reveals that they identify different factors that may influence the relationship between actors and thereby also shape the cooperation's quality. In fact, the aspects mentioned in paragraphs (1) and (2) can be considered to be necessary conditions for a good quality of cooperation: If there were no reasons for cooperation respectively if actors did not get in touch with each other, cooperation would not take place at all. However, by dealing with actors' opinion concerning their relationship with cooperation partners, this paragraph (3) reveals sufficient conditions for a high quality of state-societal cooperation in German family policy, being important in terms of sustainability (see above).

When it comes to the question of quality in state-societal cooperation, it is interesting to see that while state actors emphasize that cooperation with societal actors has recently rather gotten better (e.g. B3; L3), societal actors tend to stress that cooperation was better in the past (e.g. VV1; VV2; VV6; W2). Additionally, interviewees state that since the inauguration of Renate Schmidt as family minister in 2002, the Federal Family Ministry puts an emphasis on questions of marketing its daily work (B4; L3; W3; VV6; SP3) and tries to insure a long term perspective, amongst others by involving scientist (B3; SP2; W2), in the same time. These ambiguities already reveal a certain potential

for conflicts between state and societal actors. In fact, interviewees outline asymmetries in the relationship between cooperating actors which make that actors are not on a par with each others. These asymmetries' impact on relationships and cooperation between actors is judged to be a negative one by the interviewees. Broaching the issue of asymmetries in actors' relationships, interviewees consider societal actors to be just "as powerful as taken seriously by political actors" (VV7; see also VV5). Asymmetries can also apply to situations in which actors financially depend on others (VV6; W1) and may also affect state actors, e.g. when they rely on experts' knowledge in order to make their decisions socially acceptable (B6). Considering these asymmetries identified by the interviewees, this means that even if actors have (1) good reasons for cooperation and indeed (2) exchange information and/or staff, this does not imperatively mean that their cooperation is perceived as being of high quality. Even if asymmetries between actors are mostly taken for granted, interviewees stress that they have a negative impact on actors' relationships, their cooperation and its quality. However, they refer to factors that may reinforce and/or attenuate asymmetries and thereby influence their relationship and their cooperation's quality.

Firstly, VV7 emphasizes that a better *standing* of the policy as a whole may attenuate asymmetries between actors by facilitating regular contacts between political decision makers and family organizations: In the context of demographic changes getting prominent amongst state actors, it got easier for family organizations to not only reach e.g. deputies responsible for family-related questions but also chairmen of parliamentary groups (see also VV8; SP2). However, VV1 emphasizes that a good standing of family policy could also reinforce asymmetries by restraining cooperation, e.g. in the case in which the family ministry does not involve societal actors since it does not want to share the medial attention.

In addition, *financial means* are identified as influencing actors' relationships and their cooperation's quality. Interestingly, one of the interviewees thinks that a lack of financial means can foster cooperation between actors as well as increase the quality of projects (L2). However, as VV6 emphasizes, financial dependence may also lead to asymmetries and therefore have a negative impact on actors' relationship. This seems to be true for example in contexts in which scientists and political actors cooperate: If e.g. the Family Ministry as investor does not agree with scientists' findings, it may interdict the publication of the results (W2; see also W1).

In addition to that, according to interviewees, the *number of partners and members* has an influence on the relationship between state and societal actors. To some extent, the number of members can have a positive impact on an actor's standing and thereby attenuate asymmetries, e.g. in the situation in which political actors closely cooperate with big welfare organizations, representing a huge electoral power due to the number of their members (VV5). However, VV3 is convinced that if too many actors try to cooperate, they probably fail in finding a common position since there are too many differences between them with regard to content. Going in the same direction, VV7 states that being many network partners makes cooperation harder, mainly if actors come with different opinions or do not show up on meetings because they do not fully identify with the topic. Due to this lack of common positions, their potential of enforcement remains low. As a consequence, these big networks are not imperatively better recognized by politicians than small ones (VV7) and therefore do not attenuate asymmetries.

Interestingly, the criterion influencing the relationship between cooperating partners mentioned the most frequently in the interviews refers to *different working styles and self concepts* of actors which may reinforce and/or attenuate asymmetries between them. Except for some rare exceptions (e.g. J1; S1 in parts), actors mainly state that political actors' self concepts influence the quality of cooperation between state and societal actors by shaping their relationships. As a consequence of these differences in working styles and self concepts, actors' goals may considerably differ and thereby restrain cooperation. As an example, some interviewees assume that in contrast to other actors, political actors being in the government are mainly interested in fast decisions (B1; B4; W2; VV1; VV7; SP2). This may lead to an exclusion of particular actors, e.g. those who concentrate on elaborating consensual positions, approved by all of their members (B4; VV1; VV7). Furthermore, VV5 states that although the Federal Family Ministry includes societal actors in its most important decisions, asymmetries are reinforced when it comes to political considerations, resulting in the fact that organizations' opinions are not seriously taken into consideration. Also B5 admits that to some extent, societal actors' involvement in the political process may only be a formal procedure in some cases: Mainly when governmental parties agree on a topic, the organizations' opinion is heard but not imperatively integrated into the political parties' statements. In contrast, if government parties do not agree on a topic, they may be willing to consider the organizations' requests (B5; see also SP3). This means that if political actors consider the political aspect of decisions to be more important than the functional part, they do not

imperatively involve societal actors (SP3). Concerning the consequences on the relationship between actors and on the quality of their cooperation, a representative of a family organization draws a negative conclusion. According to him, “these hearings are mostly just a sort of alibi-event. Once we have the bill we all write our comments. As we are all saying different things, they [the Federal Family Ministry; R.A.] end by saying: Oh, everyone has a different opinion – that means that we can just leave the bill as it is” (VV3; see also VV1; VV6).

In addition to that, state actors may reinforce asymmetries by browbeating societal ones (first and foremost if the latter financially depend on them), e.g. by trying to tell them which topics to deal with in the future (VV8) and to consider public relations effects in their work (VV3). As a consequence, representatives from family organizations mostly indicate that cooperation’s quality has worsened in the recent past. VV8 even assumes that the administrative part of the Federal Family Ministry does not appreciate the family organizations since “that means more work for them [...]. I think that the administration would not be unhappy if family organizations were less active”. Interviewed scientists go in the same direction when they state that the relationship between scientists and political actors gets more and more difficult (see also VV8). Asymmetries are revealed by the fact that sometimes, politicians exploit scientific findings for their own goals (W1). According to W2, these asymmetries were reinforced in the recent past, due to the fact that politicians take more and more influence on scientists’ work. To his mind, asymmetries base on a difference of self-concepts between politicians and scientists: “Political actors make their decisions according to legislative periods which scientists aim at getting over” (see also W1; SP2). So even if scientists gained more influence on political decisions in the last years, they do not seem to be satisfied with their impact, as W2 stresses: “This ministry is currently surrounded by so many qualified experts, probably by more experts than ever in the past. However, there seem to be like filters which do not let any long term perspectives penetrate.”²⁸

²⁸ In the interviews, it is frequently stressed that in some cases, electoral considerations have a strong influence on the relationship between scientists and political decision makers. As a consequence, politicians and administrative actors do not always take into consideration scientists’ recommendations. However, even if scientific findings do not seem to penetrate promptly and result in a concrete action rapidly, they surely do have an (indirect) influence on decision makers’ opinion. As an example, decision makers have been criticized for not taking into consideration the aspect of time policy that had been pointed out by the Seventh Family Report (next to the aspects of infrastructural support and of financial transfer). Probably, this aspect was considered to be too complicated for any ad hoc action by political and administrative decision makers. Although this time policy aspect took some time to penetrate, it does not seem as if decision makers have forgotten it: The Eighth Family Report – scheduled for the middle of 2011 – is supposed to be called “Zeit für Verantwortung in der Familie” (*Time for responsibility in the family*) and will predominantly deal with the question of time.

Generally, it is worth mentioning that political actors can on the one hand reinforce asymmetries and thereby restrain cooperation and its quality, e.g. by interrupting the exchange of information with oppositional parties or by neglecting social partners' opinions (B5). On the other hand, they can indirectly attenuate asymmetries and foster cooperation between other actors in the same time: As a consequence to the lack of information described above, oppositional parties tend to get in touch e.g. with welfare or family organizations from which they obtain relevant information concerning legislative projects (B4; see also B1). That is how state actors can indirectly foster cooperation between other ones. Generally, societal actors indicate that the quality of cooperation depends – amongst others – on the respective political forces in the government. In this view, face-to-face contact with state actors is crucial if they want to be integrated into the legislative process (SP3). In the same time, this means that the question whether societal actors are integrated or not is strongly influenced by their personal network. That is why, as SP3 states, political proximity as well as personal confidence is crucial. However, concerning the question of asymmetries and state-societal cooperation's quality, one citation coming from a family organization's representative is reflective of most of the interviewees' opinion: "In fact, we do not really *cooperate* with the government. What we rather do is exchange opinions, positions. Let's face it: It would be wrong if you would think about it as cooperation. You would be on the wrong track." (VV9; see also VV1; W1). This statement reveals that even if actors identify (1) reasons for cooperation and (2) get in touch with each other, the factors mentioned above (3) can reinforce or attenuate asymmetries and thereby restrain them from cooperating responsively can get in the way of cooperation's quality.

Tab. 3: Criteria influencing the relationship between state and societal actors and their impact on the quality of cooperation

Criterion	Impact on relationships and on actors' cooperation	
	+	-
standing	VV7; VV8; SP2	VV1
financial means and financial dependence	L2	VV6; W1; W2
high number of partners	VV5	VV3; VV7;
working styles and self concepts	B1; B4; SP3	B4; B5; VV1; VV3; VV5; VV6; VV7; VV8; W1; W2; SP2; SP3

Source: Own listing

To resume, all of the factors mentioned can reinforce and/or attenuate asymmetries between actors and thereby have a positive and/or a negative impact on the relationship between cooperating actors, affecting their cooperation's quality, as shown in table 3. This is also true for the *Lokale Bündnisse für Familie*, as the following paragraphs reveal.

3.2.2. Unconventional networks seen by the interviewees – the example of the *Lokale Bündnisse für Familie*

Generally, when it comes to analyzing networks, one can distinguish between an ego-centric and a 'whole network' analysis. The first one concentrates on particular network partners and their role for the network as well as on dyadic relationships between two network partners, whereas the second one focuses on the structure of an entire network (Provan et al. 2007). For both of them, scientists mainly use quantitative data. In the context of sustainability, I suggest to consider also qualitative data, i.e. the assessment of actors involved in the network concerning their opinion about the quality of relationships between network partners. While egocentric and network level approaches rather concentrate on numbers and 'hard facts', the suggested approach takes into consideration the participative aspect of sustainability by its bottom-up perspective. By resorting to subjective impressions of involved actors, this approach helps to answer to the question of quality in actors' relationship. Generally, interviewees tend to state that a high quality of cooperation is reached when actors cooperate as equal partners respectively when they reach the desired outcome which may refer to individual or collective goals.²⁹

As specific type of cooperation involving a wide range of state as well as of societal actors and working on a topic-related basis, the *Lokale Bündnisse für Familie* (LBfF) play a major role in current German family policy in the context of sustainability discourse. Initiated by the Federal Family Ministry in 2004, the LBfFs are free in their choice of network partners, of financial resources as well as in their setting of priorities, their organization and implementation. Thus, there is no inherent hierarchization in these networks. In principle, involved actors may cooperate as equal partners. Being

²⁹ As assumed by Provan and Kenis (2007), the outcome of networks is influenced by the type of the network's governance, by questions of effectiveness and by network tensions. Depending on the network's form of governance, different critical contingencies (e.g. the number of network participants) influence the network's effectiveness in a different way. Furthermore, they state that every form of governance faces three different contradictory logics which have an impact on a networks' effectiveness.

referred to as example for a sustainable form of cooperation (e.g. Ristau 2005: 22; Bertram 2005), the Federal Family Ministry states that the LBfFs have positive impacts mainly concerning the degree of actors' integration as well as concerning economic effects (BMFSFJ 2006a). However, this analysis does not consider the actors' opinion concerning their relationships and the quality of cooperation. Indeed, in terms of sustainability and its participative aspect, actors' points of view should also be taken into consideration. This is the aim of the following paragraphs.

Akin to the other interviewees cited above, also the representatives from the LBfFs refer to reasons for and instruments of cooperation respectively to aspects which may influence their relationships and thereby shape their cooperation's quality. Concerning the different *reasons* for the foundation of LBfFs, K1 states that administrative actors initiated the LBfF because to their mind, family policy-related questions should get a more important role in local political contexts. The idea that stands behind this is that if local authorities foster family policy, this could have positive impacts on the local demographic situation (K1; K3) and serve as location factor for the region. In another case, citizens identified a need of more family policy-related measures and therefore initiated the foundation of the local LBfF (K2). In addition, knock-on effects respectively mimicry can also be a reason for the foundation of a LBfF, e.g. when one city already has a LBfF and neighbouring cities then feel forced to also found one (K1). Another reason for the foundation of an LBfF could be the fact that local actors aim at promoting existing measures under the term of '*Lokales Bündnis für Familie*' or at using the support provided to LBfFs by the Federal Family Ministry (K2; K3; K4; L3).

When it comes to the *instruments of cooperation*, all interviewed actors state that there is a (more or less intensive) exchange of information and knowledge amongst network partners. All of them also indicate that in terms of cooperation, the coordinator of the LBfF plays an important role. In the cases of three interviewed LBfFs, an administrative actor coordinates and supports the network whereas societal actors mainly organize and implement activities (K1; K2; K4). These LBfFs can be considered to be lead organization-governed networks (cf. Provan/Kenis 2007). In contrast, in another case, administrative and societal actors conjointly coordinate, organize and implement their actions (K3) and may therefore be regarded as being more of a participant-governed network (cf. Provan/Kenis 2007).

Although most of them state that generally LBfFs contribute to more cooperation between relevant actors, interviewed representatives from the LBfFs also identify aspects

that may have a positive and/or a negative impact on the actors' relationships and on the cooperation's quality. When it comes to this question, all of them indicate that there has been a sort of hype when the LBfF was founded respectively at the beginning of the cooperation, fading to a lack of participants and less intense cooperation only some months later.³⁰ According to them, cooperation can be restrained when the LBfF creates an asymmetry between actual and potential network partners, e.g. when potential partners do not want to adhere because they see the LBfF as a concurrence to their own work (K1). In addition, different working styles and self concepts of network partners are referred to as influencing cooperation's quality. For instance, K1 and K4 stress that those societal (or individual) actors who get involved on a voluntary base have a different working style than e.g. administrative actors. They emphasize that cooperation with volunteers – being common practice in the LBfFs – is not always easy since they tend to refuse formal requirements (K1; K4). Furthermore, K1 indicates that within his LBfF, societal actors do not want political and administrative actors to get involved since they fear that the latter want to delegate their genuine tasks to societal actors (K1). That is why in this case, the involvement of political and administrative actors can have a negative impact on actors' relationships and their cooperation's quality (K1). On the other hand, the latter often take care of coordination tasks and may therefore have a positive impact on the actors' cooperation within the LBfF (K1). So in this case, one aspect (different working styles and self concepts) can have a positive *and* a negative impact on actors' relationships and their cooperation's quality in the same time. According to K4, the same is true for the impact of financial means on actors' cooperation within the LBfF: Even if it creates asymmetries, financial dependence also results in the fact that societal and state actors have to cooperate since the latter usually provide financial support. That means that if societal actors would insist on excluding state ones, they would cut off their nose to spite their face. On the other hand, societal actors may be tempted to reduce cooperation with state actors to a minimum for the reasons explained above. This reaction may result in tensions in actors' relationships and thereby negatively affect the quality of cooperation. This can e.g. be observed in situations in which, due to a lack of communication, societal actors initiate a project that has already been inaugurated by state actors or the other way around (K1; K2). So even in unconventional net-

³⁰ As Weiner/Alexander have already noticed in 1998, network partners may be enthusiastic at the beginning and then come to a sort of burn out when they realize that their involvement takes a lot of time and energy.

works, basing on *vertical* cooperation, asymmetries between actors persist and influence the actors' relationships and their cooperation's quality.

To put it in a nutshell, interviewees' statements reveal that despite of the *vertical* type of cooperation including a wide range of relevant actors and aiming at avoiding hierarchical structures and although they are referred to as being a good example of sustainability, the LBfFs do not imperatively overcome the gap between necessary and sufficient conditions in terms of cooperation's quality: As shown above, interviewees indicate that cooperation is not always easy, amongst others due to actors' different self concepts and working styles which reinforce asymmetries between actors. These asymmetries that can usually be found in *hierarchical* structures are also present in the *vertical* type of cooperation, e.g. when political actors are involved – not for their contributions with regard to content but because of the fact that they *have to be* involved since they provide financial support. As a consequence, participating actors are not imperatively convinced of the cooperation's quality, as outlined above. All in all, interviewees representing the LBfFs judge the quality of cooperation within their LBfF to be rather mediocre (this is particularly true for the participant-governed network; K3). This leads to the assumption that despite of all advantages *vertical* cooperation implicates –, amongst others the involvement of a wide range of actors – practical experience shows that it is far away from being a really sustainable solution.

4. Résumé

Asking for the question of sustainability in German family policy, this paper reveals that having developed in a way contrary to what theoretical sustainability requirements might suggest, German family policy has for a long time been marked by ideologisation and limited participation of societal actors. However, socioeconomic transformations – caused by demographic changes amongst others – led to changes which are frequently subsumed under the term of 'sustainable family policy'. Indeed, the analysis of three expertises as well as of 32 interviews has shown that although it has evolved into a more sophisticated one over the years, the understanding of sustainability in family policy remains very heterogeneous, putting an emphasis mainly on economic aspects. This does not fit with the pretended relevance of sustainability-related questions emphasized in sustainability discourse. As a consequence, it has been stated that sustainability in German family policy can be considered to be (also) a means to other ends instead of

being (only) a concrete ambition in itself: Although it is arguable whether at that time, relevant family policy actors already acted in such a strategic manner, it seems to be that sustainability discourse has been used as a sort of ex post legitimation of changes in the welfare system that had already been induced on national and European level before the discourse's emergence.

In addition, it has been argued that there is also a discrepancy between theoretical requirements and the reality when it comes to the implementation of participative aspects of sustainability. An analysis of 32 interviews revealed that although interviewees identify reasons for and instruments of cooperation, this does not imperatively mean that they actually do cooperate and that they judge the cooperation's quality to be good. However, it has been reasoned that the quality of cooperation is an important indicator of sustainability and that it is not enough to only know *if* actors cooperate but *why* they do (not do) it and what they think of the cooperation's *quality*. Using the example of unconventional networks involving a wide range of state and societal actors and working rather on a topic-related than on a functional basis, it has been revealed that mainly differences in working style and self concepts between actors can have a negative impact on actors' relationships and thereby negatively affect their cooperation's quality. So even if these types of networks are frequently referred to as being sustainable ones in sustainability discourse, they do not imperatively overcome problems of conventional forms of cooperation.

All in all, the paper has revealed that although the concept of sustainability is referred to as being an apt way to respond to socioeconomic and demographic challenges, there is much left to do if relevant actors seriously want to close the gap between claim and reality in terms of sustainability.

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